

IN NEW JERSEY



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TRANSITIONS IN MUSIC AND CULTURE

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We have a wonderful history behind us...
It reads like the history of people in an heroic
age... If you read the history of Africa,
the history of your ancestors—people whom you
should feel proud—you will realize that they have
a history that is worthwhile.
They have traditions that have value of
which you can boast and upon which you can
base a claim for the right to share in the
blessings of democracy. We are going back
to that beautiful history and it's going
to inspire us to greater achievements.

—Carter Godwin Woodson
(1875-1950)

Founded in 1974, the Woodson Foundation, is a multidisciplinary arts organization located in Newark, New Jersey. The Foundation's mission is "to preserve, enhance and celebrate the creative expressions, the cultural heritage and the historic achievements of African-Americans through performing arts events, exhibits and educational programs." The organization has been lauded locally and nationally for the artistic quality and strong educational value of its programming. The Woodson Foundation is dedicated to fostering acceptance, value, respect, and support for the richly varied and innovative expressions of the African-American aesthetic in music, dance, theater and literature.

Things are not equal in American society regarding the acceptance, recognition, and value of African-American history, culture and art. Three-quarters of the United States population is Euro-American, and a primary emphasis is placed on Euro-American arts and culture. A great deal of

debate has occurred to find solutions that would encourage America to embrace the artistic and cultural expressions of African-Americans, and all of this nation's ethnic groups.

For centuries as Europeans fled the hardships of their respective countries for the "Land of the Free," America has been viewed as the great melting pot. In many ways there exists a continuing melding of cultures, forming American culture. But, that melting pot metaphor of surrender and assimilation does not accurately describe the cultural scene in America today.

From its birth, America has welcomed enclaves of Irish, Polish, Italian and other European ethnic groups who clung to their cultural heritage. Since the first captured African was forcibly transplanted onto these shores, the retention of certain Africanisms has existed within the African-American community.

To understand fully the character of contemporary American culture one must simultaneously understand the continuing amalgamation process that occurs among the various groups. Our homogenized pop culture is fed and supported by diverse groups of people.

Pockets of dynamic cultural activity are opening all over the country emanating from black Caribbeans, Latinos, Ukrainians, Koreans, Japanese, and countless other immigrant groups.

Like the mission of the Woodson Foundation, many community members envision an inclusive cultural community, where our nation respects, embraces,

This article discusses the popularity and importance of musical styles most often performed and enjoyed by African-Americans. Jazz, rhythm and blues and gospel, are indigenous art forms, yet they are often relegated to second-class status by critics and observers of the arts. While a select few African-Americans have reached prominence as artists in traditionally Eurocentric forms such as classical music and opera, the majority of African-Americans still prefer music that more closely reflects their heritage.

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values and supports the artistic contributions of all American racial and ethnic groups. Despite efforts since the Civil Rights Movement which ignited fervor for a more integrated society as a whole, and a community of cultures in particular, we still do not enjoy the pleasure of living in a nation which equitably supports the arts and culture of all its ethnic and racial groups.

Moreover, until the social consciousness period of the 1960s, the arts and culture of African-Americans was generally regarded as mere entertainment. Those African-Americans who distinguished themselves in the Euro-American artistic world were considered exceptions.

The number of terms used to characterize the cultural expressions of Americans and other people of color is fascinating. In some cases, code words are used to attempt to marginalize that culture. The irony is that these terms have brought about minimal changes in the attitudes of most Americans about the value of African-American arts and culture.

During a relatively short period of time, we have used such terms as grassroots art, community arts, minority arts, heritage programs, cultural pluralism, cultural democracy, cultural equity, and affirmative action programs when referring to the arts and culture of people of color. The latest buzz-word used to characterize non-Euro-American culture is multicultural.

These terms are used not to describe a specific artistic or cultural expression; they are used to describe any art that is not

Euro-American. The terms cast all non-Euro-American forms of artistic expression into one undifferentiated mass without respecting the critical distinctions of each particular culture. And the unfortunate implication is that this monolithic cultural expression is considered of less value than Euro-American art forms.

Ideally, waving the multicultural banner demonstrates the art world's desire to pay serious attention to the reality of America's diverse cultural traditions. But in reality the hidden dynamics involved in the use of this social jargon demeans the value of the art that is being described. When jazz music is referred to as "grassroots art," it is being defined by social criteria that imply a lessening of value. When jazz music is defined as "minority art," the definition is not based on the distinct qualities of the music which sets it apart from other styles of music. If jazz is called "community art," is anything really being said about the music itself? Musical styles *cannot* be described by using any of the other above-mentioned terms.

If we stripped away the social jargon and the confusion it fosters and focused purely on critical respect for the creative expressions of all cultures, we could quickly redress the historical imbalances existing in the American arts community.

This country was founded on Eurocentric value systems and today America is most definitely Euro-American. This does not mean, however, that African-Americans make no contribution to the representative culture of this nation. Rather, it recognizes the fundamental fact that the culture that is

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perpetuated and glorified is Eurocentric. Presently, we have a totally different society than we had 500 years ago. And although today's American culture has evolved as a result of an amalgamation of many cultures, a large segment of our society still clings to a myopic view of the distant past.

If we are to achieve representative diversity in this country, we need to understand that within different cultural enclaves that make up the United States, and most specifically within the African-American culture, an operative value system exists which does not place primary value on Eurocentric cultural expressions. African-American music is a good example of this. The primary focus, in African-American culture is placed on jazz, rhythm and blues (R&B), and gospel.

Critics and scholars need to recognize equally the artistic value of the work of Leonard Bernstein and Duke Ellington or the work of Aaron Copeland and Thelonious Monk. While the work of these artists may emanate from different cultural experiences, the worth of their art deserves equal critical respect. In other words, intricate, complicated musical compositions ought to be respected on their artistic merit and be removed from limiting social and political criticism as the nation seeks to support its artists.

America has a long history of trying to *civilize* its African-American citizens to appreciate classical forms of artistic expression that are grounded in the Eurocentric historical tradition. African-

Americans have a relatively short tradition of participation in Euro-American forms of cultural expression, in opera as performers and in symphony as musicians, composers and conductors.

Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, William Warfield, and Leontyne Price are pioneers in this regard. Other trailblazers are James De Priest, the brilliant music director of the Oregon Symphony Orchestra, and Paul Freeman, music director emeritus of the Victoria Symphony in British Columbia, Canada.

When Dean Dixon, the first black to conduct a major symphony orchestra, took the podium of the New York Philharmonic in 1948, he inspired Dennis de Coteau, former music director of the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra. Among the leading full-time African-American symphony conductors have been Paul Freeman, Isaiah Jackson, Raymond Harvey and Willie Anthony Waters. Michael Morgan and Leslie Dunner gained access as assistant conductors.

African-American women, too, have earned respect as conductors. Consider Tania Leon and Kay George Roberts who have also served as music directors of symphony orchestras. Antoinette Handy, the former director of the music program at the National Endowment for the Arts says that "although most black conductors are as competitive as any other American conductors, none has ever been considered for the prestigious post of music director of the 10 top American orchestras."

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Despite the success of a few African-Americans in the opera and symphony music fields, blacks make up only one percent of the 4,000 classical musicians playing in the country's major orchestras, according to a study by the Music Association Fund of the New York Philharmonic, which provides fellowships to "minority" classical musicians.

The response, however, of African-American classical musicians to gaining access to symphony orchestra via the social goals of affirmative action are worth noting. In 1988, by threatening to eliminate the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's state grant, the Michigan legislature forced the orchestra to hire Richard Robinson, the first African-American musician employed by the orchestra in 14 years. However, African-American classical musicians prefer to be judged on artistic merit.

James De Priest turned down the Detroit Symphony's offer for him to replace Gunther Herbig, saying, "It's impossible for me to go to the Detroit Symphony because of the atmosphere. People mean well, but you fight for years to make race irrelevant and now they are making race an issue."

Likewise, Omen Young, a young African-American cellist trained at Yale, won a screened audition in Detroit but chose to go to the Pittsburgh Symphony, fearing that his selection in Detroit might be construed as racial rather than artistic.

African-American opera singers have also made gains in the classical field. George Shirley, Simon Estes, Jessye Norman,

Kathleen Battle, Shirley Verrett and Grace Bumbry are among opera's most distinguished voices. African-American composers such as the legendary William Grant Still and New Jersey's own Pulitzer Prize winner, George Walker, have also made progress in the classical field. But, progress in the field of European classical music is not the dominant interest of African-American people.

Certainly African-Americans greatly appreciate the progress that our divas, conductors, and musicians have made in the Euro-American classical fields. And recognition of these gains is very important. However, it still does not displace the fact that the majority of African-Americans are primarily interested in jazz, R&B and gospel music.

For many years, society placed its emphasis on trying to acculturate African-Americans to appreciate European classical music. But our cultural desires and proclivities lie elsewhere. During this same period, we have continued to make extraordinary progress in institutionalizing gospel music, revolutionizing the pop music field, and raising public acceptance for jazz music, which is often referred to as "African-American classical music."

African-Americans continue to develop new musical forms from disco to rap and continue to explore and create new contributions. While there will always be a segment of the African-American population that is involved in Euro-American traditions of music, the primary interest remains rooted in those forms of music that uniquely express our cultural experience and heritage.

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Our tenacious clinging to African-American expressions of music underscores its importance. In a society that has historically been closed to art created by African-Americans, we have continuously developed something that noted actress Ruby Dee refers to as "subsidiary arteries" within American society to participate in, to experience, and to nurture our indigenous art forms. Generation after generation has continued to validate the importance of our music, despite the neglect and opposition of segments of the larger society.

How is the worth and artistic value of music measured? Who determines how the artistic worth of jazz, R&B and gospel is measured? Is the worth of artistic expression related to the value placed on it by the aesthetics of a specific ethnic or cultural group from which that music emanates? Or is all music to be judged solely by Euro-American aesthetic criteria?

Within the African-American community jazz is very important. It is one of America's few indigenous art forms and a unique product of our African roots intertwined with our experience in this country. African-Americans created jazz by combining complex African rhythms and the off-pitch notes of the African tradition with the new elements of music they heard in America.

Though all the major innovators, W.C. Handy, Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Holiday, Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and

others, are of African-American ancestry the wellspring of jazz is not limited to America. Its impact and appeal is universal and can be seen from one end of the planet to the other.

Today, there are large numbers of American, European, and, most notably, Japanese musicians devoting their careers to jazz. This art form has come out of the African-American community and received worldwide acclaim. However, here, in its birthplace, jazz is still viewed by too many as a second-class art form. Traditionally, America has not provided acceptance, respect, and support to the beautiful music called jazz. But, among African-Americans there will always be more value for jazz than for Euro-American symphony music.

Gospel music, which is an institution in the African-American community, has had a major influence on American music in general. Gospel music is perhaps the most vital musical form in our culture. It originated in and is performed Sunday after Sunday in the African-American church, which has been the training ground for many popular singers in jazz, R&B, pop, musical theater, and even opera.

Our conservatory of music has historically been the African-American church. There are many singers who come out of the church and go on to formal training, but they learn music initially in the church. Gospel music in African-American culture as a vocal art form is held in the same high esteem, and supported to a great extent, as opera is supported in the Euro-American tradition.

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Although Thomas Andrew Dorsey is considered the father of gospel music, the roots of gospel music are found in African-American spirituals. The spirituals or sorrow songs were created during the awfully bleak period of slavery to express the religious beliefs of African-Americans as well as their feelings about slavery and their yearning for freedom. These songs were very emotional, very sad, and were a combination of the musical traditions of West Africa, Protestant hymns, and stories from the Bible. Like jazz they are a peculiarly American creation.

Although deeply rooted in the music once referred to as "Negro spirituals," gospel music which also expresses religious faith and social conditions is more joyful and upbeat. As a young man, Thomas Dorsey, gained extensive experience in the blues/jazz world where he played piano and wrote songs for legendary blues singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Dorsey combined African-American religious music, spirituals, and the syncopation of jazz and blues, with the spontaneity common to all African-American music, to create gospel.

As is characteristic of jazz, improvisation is one of the main features of gospel music. Gospel is today the dominant religious music in African-American culture. It has transcended the boundaries of religion. It is an important ingredient in the development of most contemporary music. James Haskins, in his book *Black Music in America*, reports that Mahalia Jackson is credited with spreading the message of

gospel music throughout the world in a way that no other singer ever has, before or since, and with influencing many divergent musical styles as a result.

Gospel music has had a great impact on rock & roll, R&B and pop music. In addition to Mahalia Jackson's influence, another factor is that many popular African-American musical artists past and present such as Otis Redding, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Whitney Houston, Gladys Knight, Aretha Franklin, Little Richard and Al Green among others, began their singing careers in the church.

While spirituals and gospel music were developing within the African-American religious communities, the blues, R&B, and now rap music have been developed and have progressed in the secular community.

Many folks are quick to dismiss rap music without considering how it has evolved out of other musical forms. We all know that "brothers" have been rappin' for decades. This is not a new phenomena. The twist today is that young brothers and sisters have become very entrepreneurial, and are now earning "crazy" money rappin'.

The evolution of rap music is easy to understand. Those weaned on R&B should remember Lloyd Price, Babs Gonzales, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, and Louie Jordan and his Tympani Five. All of these urban shouters and honkers are forerunners to Run DMC, Kurtis Blow, Salt-n-Pepa, Queen Latifah, and other rappers.

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Another tributary to this rap phenomenon emerges from jazz vocalese and such scatters as Leo Watson, Slam Stewart, Cab Calloway, King Pleasure, Jon Hendricks, and Eddie Jefferson. Nothing has changed but the lyrics; in many ways, today's rap is far more politically relevant, but sadly, in some cases, more profane.

The complexity and variety of African-American musical styles discredits the notion of a monolithic contribution that can be described by social terms and jargon such as "minority art" or "multicultural." While respect is accorded to Euro-American styles of music, most African-Americans definitely do not regard opera or symphony as their primary source of musical expression, appreciation, or participation. In other words "we can't relate."

All of the efforts, blatant or subtle, to "civilize" African-Americans to the good taste of Eurocentric musical styles and traditions have for the most part failed.

However, one of the most intriguing artistic phenomena in America music today is what's happening in the pop music field, which is a clear example of cross-cultural expression. R&B and gospel music have affected popular music in this country so that the lines are almost blurred between what is categorized as pop music and what is categorized as R&B music.

So penetrating is the impact of African-American music that African-American musicians are listed in the *Billboard* 200 category (pop album listings), which has traditionally been the "white" listing.

Conversely, white musicians are listed in *Billboard's* Top R&B Albums category. And rap albums, supposedly derived from African-American "street" culture, are regularly at the top of the *Billboard* 200 chart. This means that members of the larger society are buying rap music in large quantities.

When this cross fertilization is closely examined, it is clear that African-American musical influences have permeated all forms of American contemporary musical expression. However, this nation will be ultimately successful in breaking down barriers to creative and artistic expression only when it allows all artists' contributions to have representative expression and equal respect.

In terms of American popular artists, from the legendary fame of Elvis Presley to Michael Bolton and Madonna, the resounding impact of African-American music rings through the rhythm and the blues. The African-American impact on American music has changed the whole tradition of popular music in this country. This is an undeniable fact.

But because of this nation's emphasis on Euro-American culture and the lack of critical respect for African-American cultural expressions, segments of the larger society are still unable to acknowledge forthrightly the overwhelming influence of jazz, R&B and gospel music.

The hypocrisy of this lack of critical respect for African-American music can be seen in its commercial exploitation. Record companies have built empires using

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our music and our artists as a primary economic base. And listen carefully to those TV commercials. From cereal to soap to foreign cars you will find our music from the Motown sound to Kris Kross to John Coltrane to Aretha Franklin helping to sell those products.

Our continued quest must be to cultivate genuine critical respect for jazz, R&B and gospel music, as well as other African-American styles of musical expression. We must strive to uphold their integrity in spite of how the music may be perceived by segments of the larger society. This means supporting the arts institutions that train our musicians of tomorrow, such as the Newark Community School for the Arts, the Newark Boys Chorus School, the Greater Newark Youth Orchestra (of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra), Newark Arts High School, the Jazz Institute of New Brunswick, WBGO Jazz-88, and others.

We must continue to be advocates for music education in public and private schools and be ever vigilant to turn around any efforts to cast the arts as a "frill" or as unessential to the basic education of children. Music taught in elementary and secondary schools should not only be grounded in the Euro-American musical tradition, but also in the indigenous musical expressions representing the ethnic diversity of the student populations.

Many children today are adept in technology and perhaps would spend more time at home if they had an electric keyboard or some inexpensive eight-track recording equipment. Provision of musical instruments by parents is becoming more essential, now that instruments aren't as readily available in the urban public schools. As parents, we must continually create opportunities to introduce our children to the rich and varied musical expressions of African-Americans through record-listening sessions, family outings to musical events, and family viewing and discussion of public television documentaries about music.

Above all, we must remain staunch defenders of the integrity of our music, under any circumstances, and resist all efforts to diminish its artistic value and historical significance.

We younger Negro artists who create
now intend to express our individual dark-
skinned selves without fear or shame...
We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.
The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom
laughs... We build our temples for
tomorrow, strong as we know how,
and we stand on the mountain,
free within ourselves.

—Langston Hughes
(1902-1967)